

Geronimo, Apache villagers held at Alabama's Mount Vernon were among first 'political prisoners'



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This is the second part of a four-part history of the Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital site near Mobile. An introduction and timeline, then-and-now photos and the history of Mount Vernon Arsenal, are linked at right.

On Sept. 4, 1886, after decades of fighting to keep control of Apache land, Geronimo became the last Indian leader to formally surrender to the United States. The legendary warrior, born in 1829 in Mexican territory that is now part of New Mexico and later forced into Arizona, soon would find himself confined at a southern Alabama military post. It would be his home for seven years.

Geronimo and more than 400 of his Chiricahua Apache followers – men, women and children – were brought to the site of Mount Vernon Arsenal near Mobile in 1887. Established in 1828, the arsenal had been seized by Confederates during the Civil War and, after reverting to the federal government in 1865, was redesignated as military barracks for the second regiment of the U.S. Infantry.

The Apaches initially lived in tents and later in cabins, creating a village during their seven-year stay. Steve Davis, historian for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said while Walter Reed was in charge of the barracks as post surgeon, the Apache had few restrictions.

"They were free to roam and hunt as long as they were back to their assigned area by dark, at least while Reed was there," he said.



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They were technically "prisoners of war," although they had not been charged with or tried for crimes, causing **some Indian historians to describe them as early "political prisoners."** [Aside from their confinement, the Apache villagers seemed to dislike Alabama's humid climate.](#)

A HISTORY OF THE MT. VERNON & SEARCY SITE

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According to the book ["Geronimo and the End of the Apache Wars,"](#) edited by Charles Leland Sonnichsen, the Apaches were ready to leave when they were forced to Fort Sill, Okla., in 1894. One Indian said they disliked living in a place "no bigger than your thumb nail on which the trees were so thick that you would have to climb up to the top of a tall pine tree if you wanted to see the sun; and when you climbed down and went somewhere to sit and rest yourself, there was always something waiting to bite you."

Geronimo: The Celebrity at Mount Vernon

For decades, each time the Apaches were pushed from their land, and moved northward into the United States, Geronimo led retaliation raids on local villages. To white settlers, he was a murderous savage.

The urban legend is the cell and large door were only used when Gen. (George) Crook came to visit the barracks.

A [1894 article in The Morning News in Muncie, Ind.](#), described public sentiment in condescending terms: "Uncle Sam has determined to give the worst Indian that ever stood in moccasins a chance to mend his ways, be a good redskin and own a farm, Geronimo, the chief of the Chiricahua Apaches, the most treacherous, brutal and warlike of the southwestern tribes, who has been confined in military prisons in Florida and Alabama for nearly eight years has behaved himself ..."

But to his people, Geronimo was the embodiment of a fierce warrior. He had earned their respect. [According to Biography.com](#), Geronimo's raids increased in intensity after authorities in what was then Mexican territory attacked his village and killed his mother, wife and three children.

Because of the bloody raids that followed in both Mexico and the U.S., Geronimo was wanted by the government for decades before his 1886 surrender. He was imprisoned in 1877 but escaped in 1881. During his captivity at Mount Vernon from 1887-1894, he had a designated cell but he did not stay under lock-and-key behind its thick wooden door, Davis said.

"The urban legend is the cell and large door were only used when Gen. (George) Crook came to visit the barracks. I cannot find any primary source for that, but it seems logical," he said.



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Newspapers published accounts of Geronimo's visits to Mobile. "I have read articles about Geronimo traveling by train to Mobile, unescorted, and attending grand balls in the city with great publicity in the social pages of the Mobile paper," Davis said.

He also met with Theodore Roosevelt. "While he and the rest of the Chiricahua remained under guard, Geronimo experienced a bit of celebrity from his white former enemies," the Biography.com article said. "Less than a decade after he'd surrendered, crowds longed to catch a glimpse of the famous Indian warrior. In 1905 he published his autobiography, and that same year he received a private audience with President Theodore Roosevelt, unsuccessfully pressing the American leader to let his people return to Arizona."

Apache Life at Mount Vernon

In his 1905 biography ["Geronimo's Story of His Life"](#) as reported by S.M. Barrett, **Geronimo underscored the Indians' dislike for life at Mount Vernon**. He wrote: "We were not healthy in this place, for the climate disagreed with us. So many of our people died that I consented to let one of my wives go to the Mescalero Agency in New Mexico to live. This separation is according to our custom equivalent to what the white people call divorce, and so she married again soon after she got to Mescalero. She also kept our two small children, which she had a right to do. The children, Lenna and Robbie, are still living at Mescalero, New Mexico."

Geronimo could not write in English, although he learned to write his name while at Mount Vernon, so he had his story recorded by Barrett while at Fort Sill, Okla.

However, the Apache children received educations while in Alabama.

"Many of the younger children were sent to school in Pennsylvania but two Catholic nuns started a school for the children at Mount Vernon," he said. "They often expressed their appreciation for Geronimo's support of the school and maintaining discipline. Miss Margaret Sheppard, one of the teachers, said she could not have conducted school without Geronimo's services." The school building is no longer standing.

The captive Apaches hunted and cooked over fires and tried to live as they had before captivity. Their food, however, was supplemented by the U.S. government. According to historian Woody Skinner, who was quoted in [a 1986 Associated Press article](#), Congress did not appropriate enough funding for food so the Army inducted many of the Apaches so they qualified for rations. Geronimo was not among the inducted.



Mount Vernon/Searcy Hospital Then and Now

The Apaches also buried their dead in secrecy, preventing military personnel from witnessing their traditions or the locations of burial sites. Today, the locations of the graves have not been confirmed by archaeologists but writings give clues as to their whereabouts, Davis said. The burial sites must be protected by law, according to Michael Panhorst, coordinator of Alabama Places in Peril. In addition, he said "the sites of two Apache villages of log cabins have been located and aspects of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act may be relevant to their management."

In 1894, the Apaches were relocated to Fort Sill, where they remained captive until 1914. Although they had been told they would be confined for only two years, they were held for 27 years before being assigned to a reservation. Geronimo did not live to see it. He died at the age of 79 in 1909 after falling from his horse.

After the Apaches left Mount Vernon, the site was no longer needed for the Infantry and was decommissioned. The property was transferred to the State of Alabama in 1895 and the site was unused until 1900, when it was designated for a mental hospital. *The history of the site as a mental institution will be posted on AL.com Thursday, Sept. 8.*

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